Purcell

20p

A. K. Holland

NOVELLO SHORT BIOGRAPHIES

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General Editor: Michael Hurd

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MADE IN ENGLAND

HENRY PURCELL

1659—1695

By A. K. HOLLAND

Life and Legend

EVERY schoolgirl knows that Henry Purcell, one of the greatest composers in English history, lies buried in Westminster Abbey, where he was organist for the last sixteen years of his short life. But no one knows with certainty where or when he was born, or where his family came from. One tradition has it that he was descended from an Irish branch of the Purcells, whose ancestry has been traced back to the time of William the Conqueror. Another says that he came of a Shropshire pedigree, whose family coat of arms had the three boars' heads which are also found on the title-page of one of Purcell's compositions. Legend relates that he was born in Westminster, where he is presumed to have passed most of his life. It was a very strange Westminster, or would seem so to the eyes of a modern Londoner. To the north and west lay green fields, and southwards, the river, fringed with the mansion-houses of the rich and noble, carried the merchandise to and from the City and also served as the easiest highway for people journeying thither.

Purcell was born some time in the summer or autumn of 1659—so much we can deduce from the inscription on his memorial at Westminster and from corroborative sources. There were actually three Henrys in the adjacent generations. One, the son of the composer, we need not be concerned with, because he died in infancy, as did others of Purcell's children. But Henry Purcell the Elder, as he is called, to distinguish him from his famous namesake, interests us more closely. It has always been assumed that he was the composer's father, and we know that he had a brother, Thomas, who would, therefore, be the

uncle of Henry the Younger. The elder Henry died in 1664, when Purcell was only five years of age, and the story goes that the boy was thereupon put under the care of his uncle, who was already an established musician, well up in Court circles, and a member of the Chapel Royal choir (of which more anon).

Now, there is a very interesting letter which Thomas Purcell wrote to a certain reverend gentleman named John Gostling, who was a member of the King's Chapel at this time, and who possessed a bass voice of remarkable depth. (Purcell, when he grew up, wrote many striking solos for him by way of compliment to his low notes.) This, then, is part of the letter which Thomas Purcell wrote to the Rev. Mr. Gostling in February 1679, when the young composer was nearing his twentieth year :

> " Sir,—I have received the favour of yours of the 4th with the enclosed for my son Henry. . . . My son is composing wherein you will be chiefly concerned."

And he adds a footnote, of a flattering nature, in which he explains that young Henry's composition will not omit some of those low notes for which the eminent singer was so famous. It will be seen that Thomas twice refers to Henry as " my son." He does not say " my adopted son " or " my nephew," and reading the text literally, one would say that Thomas meant what he said and that Henry was really his son, unless we are to make the far-fetched assumption that there was still another Henry Purcell, also a composer! The facts, then, all point to the conclusion that the subject of this letter was the Henry Purcell who became famous.

Whether Thomas was, or was not, Henry's father, the fact is that the young man was exceptionally well placed, by his family connections, with a view to securing a musical education and the prospect of an introduction to the musical circles of his time. Both his father and his uncle (whichever they were) were musicians and were employed in the Royal service. At the Restoration, when King

Charles II returned to the throne after the troublesome times of the Civil Wars, and after an exile in France, where he picked up a taste for French music and some of the splendours of the court of King Louis XIV, including a desire to imitate the French court-establishment of a band of twenty-four " Royal Violins," the tradition of English music was in a state of chaos. During Cromwell's " Protectorate " church music was under a cloud. There was no ban on music as such, but church music suffered, by destruction and suppression, a certain amount of harm. In the times of civil war, the arts are among the first things to suffer. Church choirs were disbanded and the musicians of the time took refuge in teaching, in the publication of secular music, in writing enormous quantities of chamber music for the viols (instruments not to be confused with the violins, though resembling them somewhat in appearance), and even in the production of stage entertainments of a musical character. The stage, like the Church, was rather under suspicion during the Puritan rule. It was alleged by some fanatics to be a form of idolatry, but somehow or other the musicians managed to persuade the authorities that music was a harmless pastime and, therefore, it was possible to try out a few entertainments of a musical nature which were not really " profane " plays. Hence we have the first tentative efforts in the direction of that new invention which was brought to birth in the early seventeenth century, called opera. In the early years of Purcell's century opera was established in Italy by a group of idealists who wished to revive the traditions of the classical Greek Drama. They thought that the use of music, in a form of musical declamation, was essential to the presentation of the legendary dramas of ancient Greece. But they did not reckon with the composers or the singers, who very soon took the law into their own hands and turned the whole entertainment into a musical show, in which the drama was only of secondary interest. This invention, the opera, was at first received

with some reserve in this country and we shall see how it affected the career of Henry Purcell.

Boyhood and Youth

Let us try to picture the surroundings in which the boy Purcell grew up. One of the first things King Charles did after his restoration to the throne was to reorganize his musical establishment, and particularly the Chapel Royal. This was originally the religious body attached to the Court, performing the daily services and attending the King on his important journeys of state. Apart from the clergy, it consisted of a number of choristers known as " Gentlemen of the Chapel " and also of " Children " (boys). Evidently, during the Civil War, the musical training of these boys had been sadly neglected, and so it fell to the lot of a certain Captain Cooke to restore the choir to its former glory. The Master of the Children (as the title ran) was empowered to travel about the country, visiting cathedrals and picking out the most promising lads for the King's service. The Captain must have had a good eye for talent, for he managed to collect a brilliant set of boys, several of whom later became famous musicians. John Blow and Pelham Humphrey, both of whom were Purcell's teachers somewhat later, were among the first set of choristers.

Purcell probably joined the choir round about the age of nine or ten. He must already have had some musical training, for both his father and his uncle, as we have seen, were musicians, and he began to compose while still a boy-chorister. By the time his voice broke he had already one or two little pieces to his credit. The boy left the Chapel with a fine equipment of clothes and was at once apprenticed to the Keeper of the King's wind instruments, one John Hingston. It must not be supposed that the royal establishment was confined to church music. There were a great many instruments in use at court functions and a large body of musicians was employed in

various capacities. The post of tuner and repairer (or " keeper ") was an important one and invaluable to a budding musician. In addition, King Charles kept a band of " Twenty-four violins " (" violins " meaning all the string instruments of the violin family) at the Chapel Royal and had them playing in the new type of anthem with instrumental accompaniment which he encouraged his young composers to write, much to the scandal of old-fashioned people, who thought that such instruments (violins) were better suited to the tavern than the church. Purcell, therefore, had many opportunities for studying all types of instruments. How well he progressed is clear from the fact that when his " Worthy Friend " Matthew Lock died in 1677 Purcell was given his post as Composer in Ordinary for the Violin, which meant a position at Court. Lock was a very fiery and independent musician, who engaged in many bitter disputes with his contemporary composers. He seems to have taken an interest in the young Purcell, and as he was connected with the theatre as well as the church, it was probably he who first turned the young composer's mind towards the new and exciting possibilities of opera. Purcell commemorated the friendship in an " Elegy " on Lock's death, which is his first important composition. Purcell was scarcely eighteen years old at this time and his career had started. Three years later he began writing a collection of " Fantasias " for strings. These fantasias (the older English word was " Fancies ") were short compositions in three or more parts. They were probably intended for violins, instruments which were tending at that time to take the place of the older viols, with their thinner and sweeter tone. The more conservative musicians did not like the new tone of the violins so well in music of this sort—a " scolding " tone, they thought. Nevertheless, the newer composers were turning their attention to the violin and a few years later Purcell wrote some important works in the form of chamber-sonatas for two violins,

viola da gamba and harpsichord (one of which is well known as the "Golden" sonata), and also at least one violin sonata, which is among his finest compositions. These works give us the impression that he was trying his hand in an accepted style of composition, and at the same time branching out into new instrumental possibilities.

The Abbey and the Court

Purcell was now well embarked on his musical career. He had, as we have seen, friends at Court, and during the next few years one appointment after another fell to him, for it must be remembered that in the seventeenth century, as nowadays, musicians could not live by composition alone. Dr. Blow (the John Blow whom we have already mentioned as one of Captain Cooke's boys) was at this time the organist of Westminster Abbey, and Purcell became his pupil and assistant. Much of the older church music had been destroyed during the Civil War, and in addition to tuning and looking after the organ Purcell had, no doubt, a certain amount of copying to do, for music publication was still in its infancy. This new apprenticeship must have had some considerable influence on his development as a church composer, and in 1679, when Purcell was just over twenty years of age, Blow (for reasons which are not explained) gave up his post at the Abbey and his pupil succeeded him as organist. To say that this was the blue riband of church appointments is perhaps not an exaggeration, though the rewards do not seem to have been especially high. Purcell's salary as organist was only £10 a year (though you must allow for the different values of money, perhaps three times as great, in those days), and in addition he received house-rent of £8 a year. But how did it come about that a young man of twenty received one of the most important organists' posts in the Kingdom, without apparently having ever held a similar post elsewhere? Jealous people would ascribe it to influence, but it is charitable to assume that

Purcell's genius had already begun to be recognized and that he received a recommendation from his teacher, Dr. Blow, whom he later described in gratitude as "one of the greatest Masters in the world." Blow was a fine musician, well known and respected in his day, but on his tombstone the chief claim that is made for him is that he was master to the "famous Mr. Henry Purcell." That Purcell was fully qualified by his training and apprenticeship cannot be doubted. He remained at the Abbey till the end of his life. Two years after his appointment he married a certain Frances Peters. They are credited with six children, three of whom died in infancy. Purcell died in his thirty-seventh year, and it is thought that there may have been some hereditary complaint; but of that we know nothing. There is a scandalous story recited by the eighteenth-century historian, Hawkins, that he died of a cold on being shut out by his wife after a convivial evening. The only indirect evidence of Purcell's convivial habits that we have is that he certainly wrote a great number of those jolly part-songs and rounds which were known at the time as "catches." But that proves nothing except that he was a very human being and enjoyed society.

His new appointments continued. At twenty-three he became one of the organists at the Chapel Royal, where Dr. Blow was now "Master of the Children." And about this time he must have become recognized as a rising composer, for he began to share with Blow the opportunities for writing ceremonial "Odes" in praise of the King. These were called "Welcome Songs." The words were, frankly, rubbish—written by the court poets of the time with, one would suspect, their tongues well in the region of the cheek. They "welcomed" the happy return of his majesty to the capital, after a visit to Newmarket, or elsewhere, and they were full of the most silly kind of flattery and adulation. Here, for instance, is an example:

" The summer's absence unconcerned we bear,
Since you, great Sir, more charming fair appear,
Scattering the mists of faction with our fear.

Shine thus for many years, and let the sight
Your friends encourage and your foes affright,
Like Joshua's sun, with undiminished light."

The court composers were expected to set this sad nonsense to music. Purcell had no option. He turned out the music on commission, and it may be said that he made a much better thing of it than the words would justify. Nevertheless, this is a branch of his work to which to-day we can find very little response.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that Purcell's official music, the music he wrote for public events and ceremonies, was of no importance or that he did less than his best on those occasions. Of his private opinions we know as little as we know about Shakespeare's, and unfortunately we know just as little about his life. It is exasperating to read in the contemporary reports that because he was so famous it occurred to no one to record his life in detail. It is clear that before he was twenty-five years of age he was already a recognized public figure. He could afford to dedicate his first published work to the King (this was the book of sonatas for two violins, viola da gamba and harpsichord referred to above), and year by year he contributed an official " ode," or, as we should say, cantata, in celebration of some public event or other. A royal wedding, a royal birthday, the suppression of a plot against the throne or even the announcement of a royal heir, drew from him the customary musical tribute. In addition, there were the public " feasts," the most important of which was held on St. Cecilia's Day (November 22). It seems that Purcell was the first English composer to write music especially for the Cecilian festival, and this annual event, for which he wrote several odes, brought him into touch

with the better type of poet. Another meeting for which he supplied what we should nowadays call " occasional " music was that of the Yorkshire gentry, who seem to have held an annual reunion in London at which vocal and instrumental music was performed. Purcell's " Yorkshire Feast Song," written in 1690, was designed for this occasion, and it was a very splendid tribute to the local patriotism of the Yorkshire people.

Coronation Music

But it was as the leading church musician of his time, and as the organist of Westminster Abbey, that Purcell wrote some of his most important ceremonial music. Early in the year 1685 King Charles II died and was succeeded by the Duke of York (James II). There was an imposing ceremony at the Abbey. Purcell contributed two anthems—" I was glad when they said unto me " and " My heart is inditing of a good matter." The latter, sung after the Queen's coronation, is a magnificent composition for voices and instruments and one of the best Purcell ever wrote.

These were troublous times, and James II was not a popular monarch. Four years later he vacated the throne and William of Orange succeeded to the Kingship. Purcell was then faced with another coronation ceremony. We do not know much about the music which was performed on that occasion, but the event was marked by a curious incident. Purcell, as the custom was, admitted a number of visitors to the organ-loft, at a special charge. Whether he thought that the money was his rightful perquisite or not, or whether he overlooked the matter, at any rate he was called to account by the Dean and Chapter. It is one of the few personal records we have of his public career. Faced with a threat of dismissal, Purcell paid up and retained his post. There is no record of any protest on his part, and it is probably exaggerating the importance of the affair to suppose

that there was a serious dispute. The only evidence we have is that the cathedral authorities seem to have taken an unusually sharp line with their organist. But it is evident that Purcell suffered no serious discredit, for he continued to be employed in the royal service. He wrote birthday odes for William's popular consort, Queen Mary, and when she died in 1694 Purcell composed in her memory some of his most solemn and touching music. The funeral procession was accompanied by music for trombones, and at the Abbey they sang his anthem " Thou knowest, Lord, the secrets of our hearts," which a contemporary observer described as a " heavenly " composition. Moreoever, he wrote two Elegies on the death of the queen, one of which, for two sopranos, is as fine a tribute as has ever been paid to mortal sovereign. This, at least, was no mere " official " music. It speaks from the heart.

The Theatre

Up to this point we have been considering Purcell chiefly as a composer of anthems, ceremonial " odes," and occasional pieces. Notwithstanding the fact that he was a famous organist and was once engaged by a celebrated organ-builder to display a new instrument which had been set up for the Temple Church in London, Purcell has left us little music for the keyboard. Some suites for the harpsichord, consisting of dance movements, and one or two organ voluntaries, are all that he is known to have written for this medium. His real love was for the theatre. The theatre, as we have observed, was in rather bad odour during the Commonwealth period, but Charles II had been impressed by the magnificent spectacles he had seen at the court of King Louis of France, and he encouraged a number of foreign musicians to settle in England and to take up the new form of entertainment known as opera. Now the English people did not take very kindly to this new art at first. They seem to have felt that there was something unnatural about a play

which was not spoken but sung. They had a fine dramatic tradition and they were also interested in those sumptuous entertainments which were called " masques." The masques were combinations of music, poetry, dancing, costume and scene, usually based on some allegorical story in which the notable people could take part, together with the professional actors and singers, somewhat on the lines of a modern pageant. In the end they came to a sort of compromise. The poets of the time, some of them famous writers like John Dryden, and some only professional versifiers like Shadwell and Nahum Tate, made a number of adaptations of old plays with the idea of including music. These " semi-operas," as they came to be called, were the characteristic form of stage entertainment in Purcell's day.

Purcell wrote for more than forty of these musical plays, sometimes only a few incidental numbers and sometimes a big score including an overture, choruses, solos and dance numbers, which turned the whole entertainment into a kind of musical play or revue. He wrote only one work which we can nowadays describe properly as an opera, and that was the famous " Dido and Æneas." (Those who have little acquaintance with his music will, of course, know the celebrated Lament, " When I am laid in Earth," which the queen sings at the end of the opera. It is based on a very common device of those times, the " ground "—that is a sequence of notes continually repeated in the bass, while the voice weaves its own patterns on top of it.) Purcell wrote this work for a girls' school at Chelsea, run by a certain Josiah Priest, who was a dancing master, and, besides being the principal of his academy for young gentlewomen, was connected with the theatre. Purcell worked with him on several occasions, but he never repeated this successful experiment of putting a whole play to music. " Dido and Æneas " (based on the classical legend) is, therefore, not typical of his work for the professional stage.

His typical work consists of the incidental music which he wrote during the last six years of his life for adapted plays. The most important of them are "Dioclesian," a rearrangement of an old Elizabethan play; "King Arthur," which was based on a legend of the famous English king; "The Fairy Queen," which was a sort of hash-up of Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream"; "The Tempest," which was also a Shakespearian hotch-potch; and "The Indian Queen," which was a musical version of a contemporary and rather bloodthirsty play by the poet-laureate, Dryden, and a collaborator, Howard. As in modern times, stage entertainment was often the result of collaboration. Dryden, who was the poet-laureate when Purcell began to be famous, provided him with a fine text in the great patriotic spectacle of "King Arthur." In "The Fairy Queen" nothing of Shakespeare remains except the bare plot. The result is more like a pantomime than a serious play. Nevertheless, Purcell composed for these works some of his most beautiful music. They are full of glorious songs, sprightly dances, and choruses which can still be listened to with pleasure. Everyone knows "Fairest Isle" from "King Arthur," but in almost every play for which Purcell wrote music there are songs and instrumental pieces which will keep his memory alive for ever.

The Last Years

Purcell crammed a huge amount of work into the last six years of his short life. Besides his music for the stage he continued to write odes and anthems for public occasions. Queen Mary died at the end of 1694, much lamented, and a magnificent ceremony was held. Much of the music was written by Purcell himself. In the following year he was taken ill and on November 21 he died after making a will in which he bequeathed all his belongings to his "loving wife," Frances. It was at once decided that

he should be buried in the Abbey, beneath the organ which he had served for over fifteen years with his art and his genius. His own music, which had been used for the queen's funeral, was performed at the memorial service, and a tablet was erected which proclaimed that he had gone "to that blessed place where only [*i.e.* where *alone*, and not on earth] his harmony can be exceeded." The poets poured out tributes in verse and everyone knew that a great musician had passed from this world. He was, we read, "much lamented." He seems to have had no enemies and was universally loved and respected. His memory and his music must always remain our proud possession.

Portraits of Purcell

Though we know so little about Purcell's life and person, except that he was universally admired by the people of his age and time, and that his few brief writings show him to have been a modest and unassuming man, there are several portraits of him which give us some idea of what he looked like. The best known is that by John Closterman in the National Portrait Gallery. There is a similar portrait by the same artist in the hall of the Royal Society of Musicians, 10 Stratford Place, London. These represent him towards the end of his short life. There is a fine engraving by R. White which formed the frontispiece of the "Sonatas of Three Parts," dating from 1683, when he was in his twenty-fourth year. (British Museum.) There is also an oil painting by Sir Godfrey Kneller (date unknown) which has been often reproduced. This, too, is in the National Portrait Gallery. There is one thing common to all these portraits. The features are very marked—the eyes prominent and penetrating, the nose large, the mouth wide and full, and chin determined. We get the impression that he must have been a very striking personality.

A SUMMARY OF PURCELL'S COMPOSITIONS

Dramatic Works, or "Semi-operas."—The only complete and wholly-sung opera is "Dido and Æneas," but "The Fairy Queen," "The Indian Queen," "King Arthur," "Dioclesian" and "The Tempest" are works in which the music predominates.

Incidental Music to forty-two plays, adapted for musical purposes.

Ceremonial Works and Occasional Pieces.—These comprise twenty-five "Odes" (such as those for St. Cecilia's Day) and "Welcome Songs," commemorating a royal birthday, the return of the King to London, and other events of public significance.

Cantatas.—Nine. For voices and instruments, mostly on words by Cowley.

Church Music.—Sixty anthems, several written for ceremonial occasions, such as coronations at Westminster Abbey. Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis in G minor; Morning and Evening Service in B flat; Te Deum and Jubilate in D; also a great many sacred hymns, psalms, etc.

Solo Cantatas on Solemn Poetry.—Over twenty.

Catches and Rounds.—Over fifty are known.

Two-Part and Three-Part Songs.—About fifty.

Solo Songs.—Over one hundred, from the famous collection "Orpheus Britannicus."

Instrumental Works.—Fifteen Fantasias for strings in parts from three to seven. Two sets of Sonatas for two violins, bass and harpsichord, and one or two other chamber works, such as the sonata for violin and a little wind-music: A collection of "Lessons," or suites for the harpsichord.

Organ.—Three or four "Voluntaries."

Literary Works.—Prefaces to some published scores. Purcell also edited the twelfth version of the famous textbook of Henry Playford, "An Introduction to the Skill of Musick."

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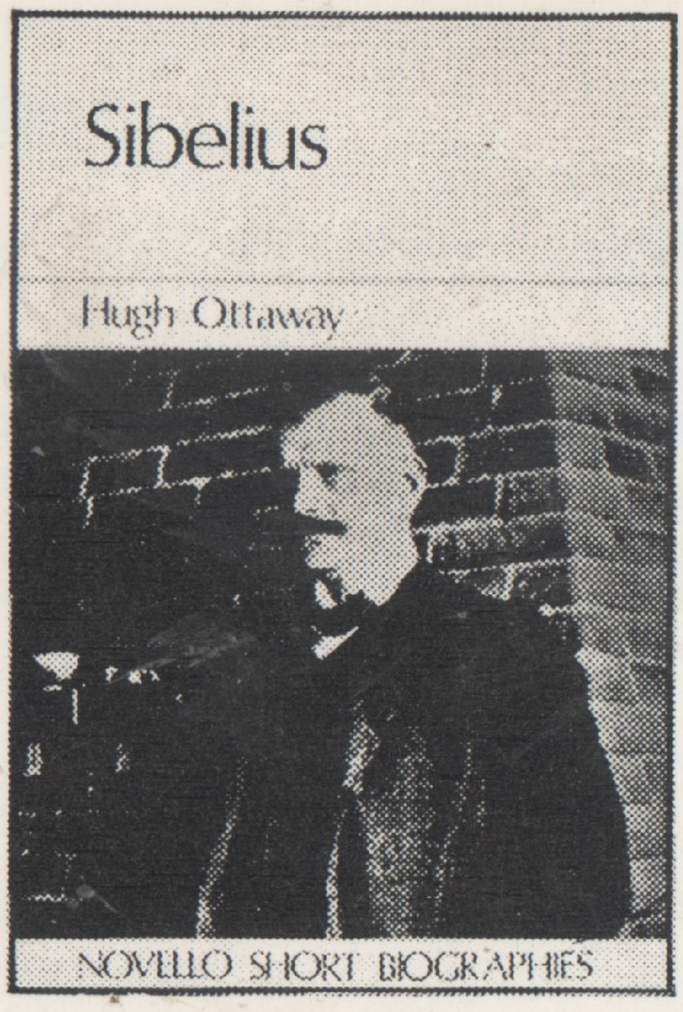

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